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Waldheim Under Siege

As the charges against him pile up, he tries to clinch the Austrian presidency

His opponent is a Socialist, but at times Kurt Waldheim seems to be running against Israel and the World Jewish Congress. At a rally last week in the industrial town of Schwechat, Waldheim and his conservative supporters lashed out at the critics who keep digging up information about his service in the German Army during World War II, information that Waldheim suppressed for more than 40 years. Now, campaigning for the presidency of Austria, Waldheim charged that "the same circles from abroad" were still trying to smear him. "Neither a Herr Singer in New York nor a Herr Shamir in Israel... has the right to meddle in the affairs of another state," he said, referring to the secretary-general of the WJC and the foreign minister of Israel, both of whom have denounced his wartime record. "Ladies and gentlemen," Waldheim continued, "enough of the past! We have more important problems to solve."

So far, Waldheim, 67, appears to be in a commanding position for the presidential runoff next Sunday. A Gallup poll published two weeks ago gave him 53 percent of the vote, to 47 percent for his opponent, Kurt Steyrer. The Socialists say their own polls show a closer race—48.5 percent for Waldheim and 46 percent for Steyrer—and they insist that enough Austrians could yet change their minds to make an upset possible. But some party leaders concede that their attempts to exploit the controversy over Waldheim's Nazi ties have backfired. They may be right. "In a perfect world, he would stand trial," claims Elan Steinberg, executive director of the WJC. "In an imperfect world, he would go away. In this most imperfect world, he may become president of Austria."

'It's all not true': Waldheim is taking no chances. He has refused to debate Steyrer in the closing stage of the campaign, and he has announced that he will not submit to more questioning from the foreign press. "I tell you frankly that the reporting of your magazine was so bad and so negative and so against good faith that I do not intend to give any interview," he told NEWSWEEK's Andrew Nagorski. "You accept always the negative arguments and never accept the positive as far as I am concerned," Waldheim added. "There's no truth whatsoever concerning the accusations... of my having been a Nazi. The opposite is true. And having committed war crimes, the opposite is true. Or having been involved in deportations of Jews from Greece, it's all not true.

It's all an invention."

Waldheim's association with the Nazis (box) continues to haunt him, especially his service as an interpreter and intelligence officer in the Balkans from 1942 to 1945. Last week the WJC released a copy of the United Nations file on Waldheim, which records Yugoslavia's charge that he was a war criminal (NEWSWEEK, May 26). The group also published new information from wartime German documents discovered in the U.S. National Archives. The papers showed that Waldheim attended meetings in 1944 where officers discussed the use of civilian hostages and slave labor and the progress of "cleansing operations" in which many Yugoslav villages were destroyed. As investigators followed the paper trail, Nazi-hunter Beate Klarsfeld led a small group of protesters who booed Waldheim at some of his rallies and released balloons bearing the message: "Happy is he who forgets."

What he knew: Despite all the dirt dug up by the WJC, there is no proof yet that Waldheim personally took part in any atrocities. But there is evidence that he and his intelligence unit produced reports and transmitted orders that sometimes were followed by atrocities. And there is reason to believe that Waldheim knew about the massacres of civilians in Greece and Yugoslavia, the deportation of Greek Jews and the interrogation and murder of Allied POW's.

The revelations about Waldheim's past have stunned many of the people who knew him during his postwar career, when he served as an Austrian diplomat, as foreign minister and, for 10 years, as secretary-general of the United Nations. Now that Waldheim's reputation is under attack, stories are coming out about the dark side of his character. Former colleagues now reveal, perhaps a

bit gleefully, that Waldheim was a consummate opportunist, whose dearest wish, according to one former aide, was "to make page one of The New York Times." They describe him as a backer and filler of limited intellect who seemed indifferent to the line between truth and falsehood. They say Waldheim was a tyrant to his subordinates but an apple polisher among the powerful. Above all, he seemed to bend with every breeze. "He wanted to please everyone," says Brian Urquhart, who served Waldheim as a key under secretary-general. "He was obsequious to the Russians," recalls Robert Rhodes James, a member of the British Parliament who was a U.N. speechwriter for Waldheim. "But then he was just as obsequious to the Americans."

During his U.N. years Waldheim repeatedly claimed that he was released from military service after being wounded on the Russian front in late 1941 and spent the rest of the war studying law. In fact, he was assigned to the Balkans and pursued his studies on the side. But at the United Nations, Waldheim "used to sit around in the evenings and reminisce about his days at law school in 1943 and 1944," says Rhodes James. "It was lies, all lies. And now I feel betrayed, as does nearly everyone who worked for him then." But some former associates were not surprised by Waldheim's ability to avoid the truth. "Waldheim is so constituted that, by now, he does not believe *himself* that he has a disreputable war record," says a former aide. "What-

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ever the facts, he has simply repressed them, totally."

Waldheim still has his defenders in the diplomatic world. They argue that his reluctance to take firm stands was appropriate to the job of secretary-general and was a natural result of his Austrian background. "Remember," says Georg Hennig, Austria's current ambassador to Japan and a member of Waldheim's inner circle in New York, "he was from a neutral country with no power of his own and was at the head of an organization of 140 or 150 states, all with their own ideas." A high-ranking UNESCO official contends that Waldheim was elected secretary-general in 1971 because important nations "didn't want an activist, they wanted a nobody."

A clean bill of health: At the time of his election, Waldheim's activities in the Balkans were still unknown. "What would you expect us to do?" asks a European official who voted for Waldheim. "He had been admitted to the Austrian Foreign Service. He'd been minister and ambassador. He had even run for president [in 1971]. So far as we were concerned, he carried the Austrian stamp of approval." But the Austrian government also was in the dark. Fritz Molden, who got Waldheim a job in 1946 as a personal assistant to the foreign minister, checked with his own Interior Ministry, which found no Nazi taint. Then Molden consulted friends at the OSS, the precursor of the CIA, and at U.S. Army counterintelligence; both organizations gave Waldheim a clean bill of health. "To be a first lieutenant after six years in the war was a very low rank," Molden says now. "It didn't occur to me to ask what he did."

The fact that Waldheim tried to cover up his service in the Balkans could suggest

that he was vulnerable to blackmail by anyone who knew the truth. Some supporters of Israel suspect that Waldheim favored the Palestinian cause. Other critics recall that during the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, when Waldheim was foreign minister, the Austrian Embassy in Prague was ordered to keep Czech refugees out of the building. (Waldheim says he doesn't recall the order, which in any case was ignored.) But people who worked with him don't believe that Waldheim was pressured into favoring one side or another. "I have no basis whatsoever [to believe] that anyone exerted any undue influence on Waldheim because of his past," says Donald McHenry, chief U.S. delegate under President Carter. "He was not pro-Soviet or pro-Third World," adds a former U.N. official. "He was just pro-Waldheim."

Waldheim was a happy and hardworking secretary-general—"a man fulfilled," says Jacques Leprette, former French ambassador to the United Nations. Waldheim loved the elaborate protocol surrounding his office, and so did his wife, Sissy, who sometimes referred to herself as the First Lady of the world. Waldheim's weaknesses, Urquhart recalls, were an "insatiable ambition for public office" and a "monstrous ego." Rhodes James says Waldheim was given to "volcanic bursts of temper." And frequently he tyrannized his own staff. As with most tyrants, the only way to stop Waldheim was to stand up to him. One day in late 1973, after weeks of backbreaking work and frazzled tempers, his senior staff quit en masse. The next day, calmed and chastened, Waldheim called each one in singly and apologized, asking his aides to come back to work.

Waldheim's warmest supporters admit he was sometimes insensitive. Visiting a

refugee camp in the famine-struck Sahel region of west Africa, he came upon a gaunt, hollow-eyed young woman holding a cadaverous baby who was obviously close to death. To the horror of his aides, Waldheim approached the woman and exclaimed, like a politician on the campaign trail: "My, what a lovely little child you have."

No one has ever accused Waldheim of being brilliant. "He's no genius," says Pierre Harmel, a former foreign minister of Belgium. Adds a former U.N. aide: "You simply couldn't believe the lapses, the holes in his knowledge." At one cocktail party in New York, an American journalist raised his glass to Waldheim and pronounced the Hebrew toast, "L'chaim." "Ah," said Waldheim. "You speak Arabic." In 1973, during a visit to Israel, Waldheim began some after-dinner remarks by saying: "I am so happy to be here in your capital city of Jerusalem." Immediately after dinner, a Waldheim aide pointed out that his boss had committed a diplomatic blunder; most members of the United Nations reject Israel's claims to Jerusalem and recognize Tel Aviv as its capital. "I didn't say it," Waldheim told his assistant. "There were no journalists present. So I didn't say it."

His finest hour: Waldheim was a hard worker who was devoted to the cause of the United Nations, and he did have some personal successes. The most important came at the end of the 1973 Mideast war, when he worked round the clock to help set up the truce talks between Egypt and Israel at Kilometer 101, while simultaneously acting as a mediator between Washington and Moscow. "Thank God for the United Nations," Henry Kissinger said at the time—possibly the strongest testimonial Waldheim ever received.

Now that the truth has begun to come out about his wartime service, some of Waldheim's former colleagues regret that he has not withdrawn from the presidential race. His refusal to step down, they say, has damaged Austria's reputation and that of the United Nations. But Waldheim's ego may be too big, and too insensitive, for that sort of gesture. "The man has the hide of a rhinoceros," says Urquhart. And so the campaign goes on, still stressing Waldheim's international experience. Some of his posters show him against the skyline of Manhattan, and his campaign theme song is still "New York, New York." "The whole absurdity of this situation is summed up in the slogans," says Vienna psychiatrist Erwin Ringel. "At first, it was 'Elect Waldheim because the world loves him.' Now it's 'Elect Waldheim because the world hates him'." Circumstances change, but Kurt Waldheim lumbers on, marching to the beat of his own ambition.

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